

C H A P T E R F I F T E E N

"Judge, are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay." Hardcastle pretended to be unsteady on his feet, leaning heavily on Beth as she helped him to the lone chair in the room. Dropping into the seat, he exhaled with a loud whoosh. "Damn! What kinda pills do you give out around here? Those things really knock ya for a loop."

"I don't give them out," Beth corrected in a hard voice, "and I wish no one else would, either. I hate what those pills do to a person. If I had my way..."

She stopped, and leaning forward, Hardcastle urged, "You'd do what, Beth?"

She turned away from him. "I've only been here three weeks," she murmured, "I-I'm sorry, Judge."

Hardcastle studied the warm brown hair, the shoulders which shook convulsively, and made his decision. "C'mere, young lady."

She looked up, the decisive tone of the judge's voice causing her to blink in surprise. Doing as she was told, she stopped in front of his chair, her eyes widening when Hardcastle jumped to his feet.

Gripping her shoulders gently, he peered into her brown eyes, and nodded. "All right, I'm gonna put my life in your hands," he informed her solemnly, "and I just hope it's safe there."

"I-I don't understand," she stammered.

"'Course you don't," he agreed gruffly, "and that's why I'm gonna explain. My name really is Judge Milton C. Hardcastle, and I'm really retired, but the rest of the story's just a little bit different from what you've been told. You see, I'm not exactly the senile ol' man I led ya to believe, and McCormick's not the creepy son that I told you he was, either."

Beth continued to look confused. "Is-is he your son at all?"

"Nah," Hardcastle grinned, "but I wish he was sometimes. Truth is, the kid's more'n a son--he's a damned good friend."

That's why he's helping me out in this, even though he hates it like hell."

"Can I--can I ask exactly what you're doing?" Beth questioned hesitantly.

"Sure, you can," he readily agreed. "Matter of fact, I'll tell ya without you even having to ask." Pushing her gently into the chair, Hardcastle began his narrative with Caldwell's death, winding it up with the details of McCormick's visit, and his own planned break-in that coming night.

Beth listened to the explanation in silence, and at its end, she rose, reaching out to touch Hardcastle's arm. "Judge, there's one other person in this place who has to know about this. Let me go get him--please."

Hardcastle hesitated. "Who is this guy?"

"His name's Steve Mitchum, and he--"

"Served time for beating up an old man and woman," Hardcastle finished in an angry voice.

"I know that," Beth defended heatedly, "but he's changed, Judge, you've got to believe that. Steve and I--we've talked about what's going on here, but-but we can't do anything about it. It's destroying both of us."

Seeing the anguish in her eyes, Hardcastle nodded at last. "Okay, go get him. But be discreet about it," he called after her.

The door swung shut behind the nurse, and Hardcastle moved across the room, taking up a position with his back against the wall. He trusted the young woman, but he had been fooled by a pretty face before. There was also the possibility Beth was telling the truth, but that Mitchum hadn't changed as much as she believed. Even if he had, there was always the chance that Dejohn or Mason might overhear something and become suspicious.

Trying to prepare himself for any eventuality, Hardcastle rolled the bedstand in front of him, within easy reach if he needed it as a weapon, and waited.

Minutes later the door opened slightly and two people slipped into the room--Beth and a young man the judge had not seen before. Hardcastle's eyes swept over the attendant, and noting the bruise along his left jaw, asked gruffly, "What happened to you?"

"Mason," came the clipped reply, and Hardcastle relaxed.

Clasping Mitchum's hand, Beth pulled him towards the judge, and explained, "Steve walked in on him just when he hit Mr. Baldwin four rooms down. When he tried to stop Mason from doing it again, he hit Steve instead, then dared him to go to the police."

Hardcastle nodded in understanding, "Well, children, Mason has met his match. I've got enough goods on that creep to put him away for twenty years, but what we need to do now is get the head honcho--Dejohn."

"He's the biggest crook of all, Judge," Mitchum agreed. "About a month and a half ago, the social services department sent a special field agent here for a surprise inspection. Dejohn got wind of it, somehow, and we all had to work double shifts, cleaning up the place and doing the laundry. The day the agent arrived, there was suddenly roast beef and mashed potatoes on the menu for everyone. He seemed to be in a hurry, gave the place a quick once-over and was apparently satisfied. As soon as he left, though, everything went back to the way it was. The regular field agent comes in once a month, stays about an hour in Dejohn's office, then leaves."

"A pay-off," Hardcastle muttered and his lips came together in a frown. "Tell me about Hanson."

Mitchum snorted. "Not much to tell. The doctor's drunk most of the time. I don't think he's involved with Dejohn, but when I started here, in one of his more lucid moments, he said keeping the patients drugged was an act of mercy because it kept them from feeling the pain of being old and abandoned."

"Talk about the Hippocratic Oath," Hardcastle muttered angrily. He thought a moment, then decided, "Okay, I wanna know who this Mason guy is. McCormick says he's not even listed as an employee, so that means he's being paid outta Dejohn's pocket. If we can get a line on him, then maybe we can connect him to Dejohn."

"How're you going to find out anything about Mason?" Beth asked.

"Fingerprints," Hardcastle grinned. "If I can get 'em to McCormick, then he can have Frank Harper run 'em through the police computer."

"Won't work," Mitchum shook his head. "Mason always wears those white gloves. It's like he's afraid he'll get some kind of disease if he touches anyone in here."

"Yeah, I've noticed that," Hardcastle rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Okay. I'll take care of the gloves. You," he pointed to Mitchum, "just be sure you get your tail back in here after Mason delivers that slop they jokingly call supper." He

jerked his head towards the door. "Now, both of you, vamoose."

They disappeared immediately, leaving the judge thankful that McCormick had no idea what he was planning to do next.

C H A P T E R S I X T E E N

Slamming the tray down on the table, Mason glared at the judge and demanded, "Who undid those restraints?"

"My son," Hardcastle replied casually, maintaining the position he had taken in front of the window. "I had to sit up so I could sign some papers for him. He forgot to fasten 'em back."

"Well, I won't," Mason snarled. "Get in bed!"

Hardcastle shook his head, "I won't do it. I don't like the restraints," he complained, carefully keeping any note of true defiance from his voice.

"Well, no one asked you what you like," Mason shot back. "It's time you learned, ol' man, that you ain't got no say around here. Do what you're told and you'll be all right. Otherwise, I'm just gonna haveta teach you a little lesson in discipline."

He took an ominous step forward, and Hardcastle shrank back. "Don't hit me," he protested feebly.

"Get in bed!"

"No!"

Mason swung at him, a powerful blow that would have, no doubt, knocked the judge senseless if it had connected. Keeping in character, however, Hardcastle stumbled to his right, ducking at the same time. Unable to pull up, Mason's fist crashed through the window behind his target, and bellowing in pain, he jerked his hand back, staring in shock at the splotches of blood on the white glove. Snatching it off, he examined the cut knuckles, then his eyes rose to Hardcastle, cowering in the corner. "Why, you decrepit son of a bitch!" he yelled. "I'm gonna kill you!"

Grabbing the bed stand, Hardcastle rolled it quickly between them. "It-it was an accident," he pleaded. "I didn't mean for you..."

Mason leaned across the piece of furniture, his gloved hand and the bare one flat on the plastic surface. "No, killin's too good for you," he decided. "I want ya around for a long, long time. You're gonna pay for this!" Slamming the bed stand out of the way, he grabbed Hardcastle by the front of his shirt, and drove his uninjured hand into the judge's stomach.

Doubling over in pain, Hardcastle clenched his fists tightly, desperately fighting the urge to send Mason crashing across the room.

Shoving him against the wall, Mason held him there with a forearm across the judge's throat, grinning as he casually lit a cigarette. Hardcastle clamped his eyes shut as Mason blew smoke in his face and laughed harshly. "Yeah, ol' man, I think it's about time I taught you a lesson you'll never forget."

Hardcastle's eyes opened slowly, widening in shock when he saw the cigarette coming towards him. Every muscle in his body cried out in protest, and his arms rose slowly, ready to push Mason aside. Suddenly Harry's face flashed in his mind, then the younger features of McCormick. If he blew his cover now, in his weakened condition, he was not at all certain he could take Mason. If he failed, Mark's cover would be blown, too, and when his young friend returned to the nursing home, he would be innocently walking to his death.

Hardcastle set his jaw in a determined line. A cigarette burn would be nothing compared to the guilt and anguish he would have to live with if he were the cause of the kid's death. He had talked McCormick into joining him in this crusade, and had to protect Mark at all costs.

He remained passive as the cigarette came close, only the steel-blue eyes revealing his hatred of the man before him. The red-hot stick of tobacco touched his neck, just above the collarbone, and Hardcastle sucked in his breath between clenched teeth, fighting against the wave of pain that shot through the top of his head.

Mason pulled the cigarette back, took another draw from it, then crushed the butt beneath his shoe. "You think you're a tough ol' bird, don't cha?" he snarled, and backhanded the judge, a hard blow that caused the white head to jerk. Hardcastle grasped at air, then sliding down the wall, collapsed in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Grabbing up his glove, Mason used it to wipe the blood from his injured hand, his eyes still upon the judge's motionless form. "That's just for starters, ol' man," he snarled. "I'm gonna make life miserable for you." Whirling around, he stalked out of the room.

Several seconds passed before one blue eye opened cautiously, swept the room, then closed again. With a groan, Hardcastle pushed himself to a sitting position, and using the wall as a support, climbed slowly to his feet. Touching the burn on his neck, he grimaced, then grasping the leg of the bed stand, wheeled it towards him, breaking into a grin when he saw the outline of a bloody hand on the plastic top. "Life's gonna be

miserable, okay," he muttered in a satisfied tone, "but the misery's gonna be all yours, Mason." The door swung open, and he drew back, relaxing when he saw Mitchum slip into the room.

The young attendant circled the bed quickly, his eyes going from the broken window to the circle of scorched flesh and the stream of blood at the corner of Hardcastle's mouth. "My God! What happened?" he whispered.

"I got his fingerprints," the judge grinned painfully and nodded towards the tray of food that had been dumped on the floor. "Hand me that spoon," he ordered. Mitchum retrieved the implement, and using the handle of it as a screwdriver, Hardcastle quickly detached the top of the bed stand. "Now, don't touch the white part of this," he instructed. "You think you can slip it outta here without being noticed?"

Mitchum glanced at the broken window and smiled. "How about that exit?"

"Good idea," Hardcastle agreed. "We're just lucky this room's on the first floor." Reaching into his pocket, he handed over a piece of paper folded in a small square. "Okay, I've already written out the instructions to McCormick. You take this to Gulls-Way, 101 Pacific Coast Highway. You know where that is?"

Mitchum nodded.

"Tell 'im as soon as Frank comes up with a name to go with those prints, he's to come back here, no matter what time it is, and insist upon seeing his ol' man again. You got that?"

"Got it," Mitchum assured him, and started to turn. His eyes fell on the bottom part of the bed stand, and he paused. "Judge, we'd better hide this under the bed or someone's going to get suspicious. If Mason misses it, just tell him that I took it for some reason."

"Okay, I'll take care of it," Hardcastle agreed. "You just get out of here and get to McCormick as quick as you can. And be careful."

"I will," Mitchum promised.

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Opening the door, McCormick's eyes widened at the strange sight of a young man dressed in a white uniform, carefully holding what appeared to be the top of some type of table. "Uh-yeah, what can I do for you?" he asked hesitantly.

The attendant took a step towards him. "My name is Steve Mitchum, and I work at the Westwood Nursing Home. Judge Hardcastle--"

McCormick exploded, grabbing the younger man by the front of his shirt, and jerking him into the house. "Mitchum! Listen, you creep, if you've hurt the judge, you're gonna be sorry you came here!"

"No, wait!" Mitchum protested, and pulled away from his grasp. "I'm a friend of the judge. He sent me here with a message for you."

McCormick stepped back, eyeing him suspiciously. "Okay, you got one minute. Make it good."

Releasing his breath, Mitchum held out the table top. "The judge got Mason's fingerprints. He said for you to take this to a man named Frank Harper, and he would run it through the police computer. Then as soon as you had a name, you're to go back to the nursing home, and insist on seeing him again. He-uh-he also gave me a note for you."

Unfolding the piece of paper quickly, McCormick scanned the brief missive, then looked up, his eyes narrowing. "I'm not the judge, Mitchum; I'm an ex-con just like you, so don't try to hand me any crap. I'm gonna ask you just once, and God help you if you lie to me--are you with Hardcastle on this, or are you working for Dejohn?"

Mitchum's eyes flashed angrily. "I'm in Dejohn's employ, but I don't work for the man. I work for those poor people in that home who're getting abused and killed."

"So how come you haven't gone to the police?" McCormick demanded.

"You said it yourself, man--I'm an ex-con," Mitchum shot back. "You know that, then you gotta know what I was in for. Mason warned me if I went to the cops, Dejohn would swear I was the one abusing the patients, and I'd be back in the joint. I

really want to help those people, but I can't-I can't go back to prison."

McCormick understood that admission all too well. "What about the nurse? Miss Tyler, I think her name is. Couldn't she do something?"

Mitchum shook his head. "I wouldn't let her. Beth's young, just outta nursing school. Nobody's gonna believe her, and if Dejohn and Mason got wind of her trying to mess up their action, there's no tellin' what they'd do to her."

"Yeah, I think those two are just about capable of anything," McCormick muttered. Taking the table top from Mitchum, he stood it carefully on a chair in the hall, his eyes widening at the sight of the bloody handprint. "You wanna tell me how the judge got this," he ordered in a tight voice.

"I-uh-I'm not sure," Mitchum hedged. "Mason always wears white gloves, and the judge had to make him take 'em off, so he-uh-he somehow caused Mason to put his fist through a window."

McCormick swallowed hard. "And what'd Mason do then?"

"He...hit the judge, a coupla times, I think. I went in the room a few minutes after Mason left and-and the judge was doubled over. There was blood on his mouth, too."

McCormick studied the younger man's face. "And what else aren't you tellin' me?" When Mitchum tried to turn away, McCormick grabbed his arm. "C'mon, man, what'd he do?"

Mitchum dropped his head. "He-he burned the judge...with a cigarette."

McCormick sucked in his breath sharply. "Oh God!" His face contorting with rage, he whirled around and running into the den, grabbed up one of his racing trophies. Slamming it against the shotgun case, he broke both the trophy and the lock. Throwing the gold cup aside, he jerked one of the guns from the case, and breaking it down, shoved a cartridge into the barrel.

Following him quickly, Mitchum grabbed his arm. "McCormick, no! If you go chargin' in there like this, someone innocent could get killed, one of the patients, or maybe even the judge!"

McCormick glared at him with eyes of fury, then looking down at the gun, he removed the cartridge, and slowly returned the weapon to the case. His emotions still wound tight, he slammed his hand against the wall in frustration. "Damn! I gotta get 'im outta there. I swear, if anything happens to him..." He stopped, suddenly embarrassed by his outburst.

Mitchum reached out, tentatively touching his arm. "Look, man, I know where you're coming from," he spoke softly. "I just met the judge today, but I could tell he's one helluva guy."

"You don't know the half of it!" McCormick exploded again. "That man's a stone-cold, hay-bearin' jackass! I don't even know why I put up with him! He gets me shot at, beat up, thrown off a train, locked in a bomb shelter, shoved outta a helicopter..." His voice changed, taking on a tone of horror. "A cigarette! My God! What kind of monsters are we dealing with?"

"The worse kind," Mitchum snarled. "The kind who only care about greed and power. You can't reason with them."

"Reason, hell!" McCormick spat and turned ice-cold eyes on Mitchum. "If Dejohn or Mason hurt that man anymore, I'm gonna make 'em wish they'd never been born."

There was silence in the room a moment, then Mitchum asked hesitantly, "You-uh-you want me to give the judge any kind of message?"

"You bet I do," McCormick shot back. "Tell Hardcastle I said to forget about that B and E he's planning tonight. Tell him-tell him I found some other evidence so we don't need Dejohn's books."

Mitchum stared at him in surprise. "What evidence did you find?"

"None," McCormick admitted, "but the judge doesn't have to know that. Tell 'im I'll be by first thing in the morning, and until then he is not--I repeat--he is not to leave his room."

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"McCormick was very emphatic about it, Judge," Mitchum related. "He said you're not to leave your room tonight."

"Okay, okay," Hardcastle grumbled, and dropping on the bed, stretched out and clasped his hands behind his head, watching the young man with interest. "What's the matter, Mitchum? McCormick give you a bad time?"

"Uh-no, no, he's an okay guy," Mitchum answered quickly.

"Then what's your problem?" Hardcastle pressed. "You look like a mountain fell on ya."

"B-Beth just told me...." Mitchum's Adam's Apple bobbed convulsively. "She found Mrs. Cramer in her room about an hour ago. She was-she was dead."

Hardcastle shot up in bed. "What happened?"

"Beth doesn't know for sure," Mitchum answered quietly. "She said as soon as she told DeJohn, he had Hanson take the body away. Mrs. Cramer was complaining last night, though, about pains in her chest and left arm."

"And they didn't do anything to help her?" Hardcastle demanded.

Mitchum shook his head silently.

"Damn! I was afraid of this!" Hardcastle muttered, his face turning dark with anger. Looking up, he motioned impatiently, "Go on, get outta here. You and Beth play it cool, and be careful. And don't worry. No one else is gonna die around here - you got my word on it."

He waited only until Mitchum left before jumping to his feet and heading for the closet. Grabbing his clothes, he began to dress furiously, his anger quickly fading to frustration and sorrow. He could not get it out of his mind that while he was lying there, probably asleep, a poor, helpless woman close by was drawing her last, agonized breath.

Zippping up his windbreaker, he swiped at the tears in his eyes, embarrassed because he was shedding them, and enraged at those who caused him to do so.

McCormick's message flashed in his mind, and glancing at himself in the mirror, Hardcastle muttered low, "Sorry, kid. I gotta do this," and felt warmed by his friend's motives. The kid wanted to protect him, but it only strengthened Hardcastle's resolve to go it alone. He had seen through McCormick's lie.

Checking his watch, he stretched out on the bed, fully clothed. It would be yet another two hours before he would feel safe in attempting the break-in. He shivered, the damp, evening air coming in through the broken window causing a chill to run through his body. Pulling the covers around him, he fell into a fitful doze, his dreams filled with lifeless eyes staring out of wrinkled faces, and red-hot cigarettes coming at him out of the darkness, brands from Hell that kept burning him again and again.

Throwing the covers back, he shot up in bed, and wiping the sweat from his face, squinted at his watch. "Close enough," he muttered, and headed for the door.

The trip to Dejohn's office was made in safety, and once there, Hardcastle gave the hallway a quick check before pulling McCormick's lock-pick from his pocket. Inserting the slender metal device in the doorknob, he moved it carefully up and down, then tried the knob. It wouldn't turn. He moved the lock-pick from left to right, and tried the door again. It wouldn't open. "How the hell's he do this?" he mumbled. He had watched McCormick perform the feat a dozen times, and it always looked so simple. "Well, if the kid can do it, so can I," he decided, and jiggling the lock-pick angrily, he started to try the door again. As his hand touched the knob, it turned beneath his fingers, and the judge froze.

There was no place in the open hallway to hide, and straightening quickly, he drew his fist back, ready to punch out whoever was on the other side of the door.

The knob turned slowly, and the door began to open inward, first just a crack, then wider. Hardcastle tensed, every muscle ready for action. He could see a dim light on in the office as the door was swung open further by an unseen hand, a foot, two feet, then a familiar figure stepped into the opening.

"Hi, Judge. I'm holding a class in the morning-- Lock-Picking 101. Wanna come?"

Hardcastle considered using the clenched fist, anyway. Thinking better of it, he satisfied himself with shoving McCormick into the room, then slamming him up against the wall. "What the hell're you doin' here?" he exploded softly.

"I just thought I'd come by and let you in," McCormick answered nonchalantly.

"How'd you get in?" Hardcastle demanded. "I got your lock-pick."

McCormick held up a small leather case. "Lesson number one, Judge--always carry a spare."

Hardcastle punched him in the shoulder with the heel of his hand. "You're gonna need a spare head when I get through with you," he warned, carefully keeping his voice down. "Now, get the hell outta here!"

McCormick shook his head stubbornly. "No can do, Kemosabe. The Lone Ranger and Tonto have been separated too long on this one. You may be able to pass yourself off as an old man, but breaking and entering is my domain."

Hardcastle studied him thoughtfully and nodded. "Okay, kiddo, do your stuff."

"I already have," McCormick grinned slyly. "I've gotten the books outta the safe, and was just starting to take pictures when I heard some jackass tryin' to kick down the door."

Hardcastle ignored the snide remark. "What'd you mean 'take pictures'?" he asked gruffly.

McCormick tapped his head. "Some of us use the ol' noggin, Judge." He revealed a small black camera which nestled perfectly in the palm of his hand. "I stopped by the camera shop and picked up this little beauty. You paid for it, of course," he grinned. "I figured instead of sitting here all night studying the books, I'd take some quick pictures, get 'em developed, and we can look 'em over in detail tomorrow."

Hardcastle gazed at the young man in open admiration. "Well, I gotta hand it to ya, kid. That's the smartest piece of thinking anyone's done in a long time."

McCormick smiled shyly. "Thanks."

"C'mon," Hardcastle slapped his back. "Let's get busy. I'm anxious to see what's in those books."

Grabbing the judge's arm, McCormick pulled him behind the desk. "I've already found out a coupla things. You were right about Mason being in Dejohn's pocket. Looks like he's paying that creep five thousand a month to do his dirty work. And here in this book, it shows the total amount they receive each month for payroll, including the wages for those ten non-existent employees. And this one should really interest you." His finger stabbed the page. "Look at how much money they got to pay for an X-ray and dialysis machine, and seven automatic beds."

"They don't have an X-ray or dialysis machine," Hardcastle hissed, "and my bed doesn't do a damned thing but just sit there."



"You know that and I know that," McCormick agreed, "but the government thinks that for once they're spending the taxpayers' money wisely."

"Huh!" Hardcastle snorted. "So with all this money coming in, how the hell do they explain where it's goin'?" He bent over the books, the lamp on the desk spotlighting his face and neck. Hearing a sharp intake of breath, he glanced up, then straightened, meeting McCormick's horrified gaze. "What's the matter?" he demanded in concern.

"Nothing," McCormick answered quickly and leaning over the books, began snapping pictures and turning the pages rapidly.

Hardcastle hesitated a moment, then laid a hand on McCormick's shoulder. "Look, it's not as bad as you think," he spoke softly.

"Oh sure," McCormick fired back, still bent over his work. "Everyday you go out and get burned by a-a... get treated like that," he finished in a whisper.

"I don't like it, either," Hardcastle returned in a low voice, "but we're doing this for a damned good cause."

McCormick straightened, his anguished eyes meeting the

judge's. "Don't you think I know that!" he flung back. "But I don't know these people, and I do know you, Judge, and if caring about you more than I care about them makes me a bad person, then that's the way it is. I can't change it."

Hardcastle squeezed his shoulder. "It doesn't make you a bad person," he promised. "It makes you a damned good friend."

"If I'm such a good friend, I would never've let you go through this hell in the first place," McCormick retorted in a hoarse voice, and returned to his work. "I'll tell ya something, Judge--" he continued snapping pictures, "--when I get through here and we get these books back in the safe, you're leaving with me."

"Now listen, Mark--"

"Don't 'Mark' me!" McCormick paused in his work long enough to glare up at the judge. "The only time you call me 'Mark' is when you got something bad to tell me, or you're tryin' to talk me into something or outta something."

"That's not true!" Hardcastle shot back in a hurt tone.

"Well, it is most of the time, but I'm not gonna fall for it, Judge. We're leaving together, and that's --"

Both froze at the sound of movement outside the door, "I'll be working late, and I don't want to be disturbed," DeJohn's voice drifted into the room.

Hardcastle moved quickly to flick off the light. "Grab the books!" he whispered.

McCormick snatched them up, and both men made a hasty retreat through the door on the opposite side of the room.

Stepping into an empty hallway, the judge grabbed McCormick's arm and hissed, "My room!" They made it there unseen, and pushing the young man towards the broken window, Hardcastle ordered, "Get outta here with those books!"

McCormick stood his ground, "Not without you."

"This is no time to be stubborn," Hardcastle argued. "You've gotta get those books to safety. We'll worry later about slipping 'em back in without getting caught."

"Why didn't you just leave 'em where they were?" McCormick retorted. "I took enough pictures to justify a search warrant. We could've gotten 'em legally."

"You didn't have time to put 'em back in the safe,"

Hardcastle explained patiently. "If Dejohn had seen 'em laying on the table, he, Mason, and the books would've taken off for places unknown."

"And you don't think he will now that the books are missing?" McCormick shot back sarcastically.

The judge shook his head. "Dejohn's got too much wrapped up in this. I figure first he'll make an effort to find out who took 'em."

"Well, he won't have to look far, will he?" McCormick returned sharply.

Hardcastle sighed. "That is what I'm tryin' to get through that thick head of yours, kid. If the books and I both disappear, Dejohn's gonna become a permanent resident of Switzerland. But if senile ol' Hardcastle's still here when he comes lookin', then he'll have no reason to suspect that the law's onto him."

"I don't like it," McCormick complained angrily.

"Yeah, I know you don't, but that's life with The Lone Ranger, kid. You haven't got any choice." McCormick still refused to move, and Hardcastle started pushing him towards the window. "Look, there's no more time to argue. You're leaving, I'm not, and that's that. Now beat it."

Knowing he had a better chance swimming the ocean than he did changing the judge's mind, McCormick capitulated with an expression of worried anger. "All right, I'll go, but if you get yourself hurt..."

"Yeah, I know, you'll kill me," Hardcastle grinned. "Now, scram!"

McCormick climbed through the window, then turning, reached in and grasped Hardcastle's wrist. "Be careful, Judge," he whispered hoarsely.

Hardcastle patted his hand. "Don't worry, I will."

He waited until McCormick disappeared into the darkness, then jerking off his clothes, took the time to hang them up neatly, and donning his pajamas, jumped in bed, wrapping the covers around him like a cocoon.

Seconds turned into minutes, Hardcastle surmising that Dejohn was checking all the rooms. At last he heard the slight creak of the door opening, and footsteps on the tiled floor. Willing himself to breathe regularly, he laid motionless, eyes closed, until he felt the blanket being jerked off him.

"Wake up!" a harsh voice sounded in his ears.

Hardcastle blinked several times, then opened his eyes wide, staring into Dejohn's angry face. "What-what's wrong?" he asked in a frightened tone. "Is there a fire?"

"There's no fire!" Dejohn shot back and grabbed the front of his pajama shirt. "Have you been wandering the halls tonight?" he demanded.

Hardcastle slowly shook his head, remaining silent.

Releasing him, Dejohn began searching his room, rummaging through the few clothes the judge had in the closet, then proceeded to check the bathroom.

Sitting up, Hardcastle asked hesitantly, "What are-what are you looking for?"

"None of your damned business!" Dejohn snapped, and started across the room. "Go back to sleep, ol' man!"

The door swung closed behind the intruder, and Hardcastle stretched out again, sighing his satisfaction. He was right--Dejohn was going nowhere until he found those books.

The judge's eyes traveled to the telephone, and he felt a pang of regret. He wanted to let McCormick know everything was going according to plan, but dared not, fearful Dejohn might have the phone wired.

Hardcastle sighed again, this time in frustration. "I'm sorry, kid," he mumbled. "Looks like you're gonna have another sleepless night."

C H A P T E R N I N E T E E N

How, he didn't know, but Dejohn had little difficulty coming up with a list of possible culprits who could have stolen the books. It had to be a family member of one of the patients who had died recently, and the purpose of the theft was obvious -- blackmail. Mrs. Cramer's son was in Paris, and had no intentions of even returning for her funeral, so that left Alex or Christine Caldwell as his chief suspects.

Not being a patient man who waited for others to take the initiative, Dejohn grabbed the phone and with his middle finger, angrily stabbed a series of numbers. A sleepy voice answered the call, and he barked, "Is that you, Caldwell?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Dejohn," he shot back angrily. "I'm just callin' to warn you -- stealing those books was a stupid and possibly fatal thing to do. If you think you're gonna get away with blackmailing me, then you'd better think again. Try that and your life ain't gonna be worth spit!"

Caldwell's voice was suddenly fully alert. "Dejohn, what the hell're you talkin' about?"

"You know damned well what I'm talkin' about! You hired someone to break into my office last night and steal all my records!"

Caldwell laughed harshly. "A great idea, Dejohn, I'm sorry I didn't think of it." His voice suddenly became angry. "If you wanna find out who stole those books, I suggest you check out a guy by the name of Hardcastle. He's a retired judge and a good friend of Harry's. He got suspicious when the old man died and threatened to do some poking around."

Dejohn swallowed hard. "Hardcastle? Is he white-headed, broad shoulders, has a son who goes by the name of Mark McCormick?"

Caldwell laughed again. "That's him, okay, but McCormick's not his son. He's an ex-con, and the two of 'em do this Batman and Robin routine catching crooks." He paused, then asked, "How do you know what Hardcastle looks like?"

"Because that son-of-a-bitchin' judge has been a patient here for the last four days!" Dejohn fired back in fury.

"You fool!"

"Watch who you're callin' names!" Dejohn hissed. "You should've warned me Hardcastle was on my case! Now, we're both in trouble, and we're gonna have to do something about it."

"Like what?" Caldwell asked suspiciously.

"I'll handle Hardcastle; you take care of his 'son'," Dejohn instructed.

"Now, wait a minute," Caldwell objected nervously. "I'd take great pleasure in knocking McCormick's lights out -- I've got a debt to pay that guy -- but I'm not a killer."

"No, you get someone else to do your dirty work," Dejohn dug sarcastically. His voice grew rough. "Don't worry, you damned coward, I'm not askin' ya to kill McCormick. I don't want either of 'em dead till I get those books back. But if you don't help me in this, I'll turn over to the police a certain letter I found among your daddy's effects," he threatened, "a letter in Harry's own handwriting which says that his true and complete will leaves all his property to his two grandchildren, and any other will which might surface designating his son and daughter as beneficiaries, was not signed by him and therefore, is fraudulent."

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line. "You were gonna blackmail me!" Caldwell accused.

"You're damned right I was!" Dejohn agreed sharply, "only I've found a better use for it. You bring McCormick here, and after I get the books back, you get the letter, then we both go our merry little ways."

"All right!" Caldwell returned angrily. "But you cross me, Dejohn, and I'll make certain you never run another scam."

The phone slammed in his ear and Dejohn laughed, not at all impressed by the threat. Returning his own receiver to its cradle, he went into the hallway, and spotting Mason, waved him into the office.

The door remained closed for several minutes, then Mason emerged, a scowl on the rough features. Grabbing the cart loaded with breakfast trays, he pulled it along behind him, as he headed down the hall.

Hardcastle looked up as the door swung open, and sighed. Mason and the morning gruel -- a combination guaranteed to start the day off on a lousy note. Determining to be the model patient, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up silently, hungry enough to eat even the nursing home fare.

Mason slammed the tray down on the bed. "Where's your table?"

"Some-some other guy came in here last night and took it," Hardcastle replied in a quivering voice.

"What the hell for?"

The judge shrugged.

"I think you're lyin'!" Mason yelled. "And you know what else I think?"

Hardcastle saw the blackjack too late. The small, metal club, cushioned only by a thin layer of rubber, came down hard against his left temple, and he crumpled, his body sprawling awkwardly across the bed.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y

* McCormick was in the funeral home again, retracing the steps he had taken that night when all the trouble began. Flicking on the light, he stared at the coffin, inhaling deeply as he raised the piece of iron gripped tightly in his grasp, certain he had performed the grisly task before. But this time something was different. Some important part was missing. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Fitting the crowbar in place, he pushed downward, the crack of the seal breaking like a clap of thunder in the silent room. The crowbar fell from nerveless fingers, and he reached forward slowly, his hands gripping the edge of the casket. He knew what he would see--Harry's face, black and horribly swollen--and he tried to steel himself against the rush of nausea that last time had sent him fleeing from the room.

The lid of the coffin began to move, pulling away from his hands and rising of its own accord, stopping only when it was fully open. His heart suddenly pounding like mad against his ribs, McCormick gazed into the face of the man who he knew and loved so well.

Hardcastle ^{lay} ~~lie~~ in tranquil repose, a slight smile touching his lips, looking as he did so often when McCormick had seen him fall asleep in his chair.

As Mark stared at him now, bluish-black splotches began covering the craggy face, then a circle of scorched flesh appeared on the swollen cheek. Before his horrified eyes, it started to spread, bursting into a tiny flame.

"Oh God! Oh God!" Sheer terror gripped McCormick, and he stumbled backwards, unable to look away from the flame which was growing ever larger.

There was movement in the coffin, and Hardcastle sat up in slow motion, his face and upper body consumed with flames. Only the eyes, piercing blue orbs, could be seen through the fire, boring into McCormick as the judge held out blazing hands and pleaded, "Help me, kid! Please help me!"

McCormick screamed, and kept screaming until his throat was raw, unable to move forward to extinguish the flames, nor able to turn and run from the horror.

Suddenly Frank was there, gripping his shoulder and

offering quiet consolation. "Mark, it's not your fault. Do you hear me? Mark?"

"Mark!"

He jerked violently, his head coming up from the desk so quickly that the map on the lieutenant's wall swam before his eyes.

"Good Lord, Mark! You okay?"

He turned his head slowly, having to blink several times before he could bring Harper's face into focus. "T-the judge," he managed to croak, and buried his head in his hands.

"Take it easy, son," Frank talked in a soothing tone. "It was just a nightmare. You know Milt as well as I do. If there's one thing he can do, it's take care of himself. He's fine, you've gotta believe that."

Lowering his hands, McCormick looked up to meet Harper's concerned gaze. "Frank, we gotta get 'im outta there," he pleaded in desperation. "We gotta do it now!"

Pulling a chair close to McCormick, Harper dropped into it and leaned forward. "Mark, I'm gonna be totally blunt," he stated quietly. "I'm going to put into words what you and I both know. It's almost five-thirty in the morning. By now, Milt is either sound asleep at the nursing home, or he's dead. Whatever the case, rushing out there now without a search warrant is not gonna solve anything." Picking up some papers on his desk, he leaned back. "Now, I found out a few things while you were asleep. You wanna hear 'em?"

His shoulders slumping in defeat, McCormick nodded slowly.

"Okay, the fingerprint data came back on Mason. That's his real name and he's listed as an employee of Dejohn's, worked for him as a chauffeur and bodyguard for the past seven years," Harper explained. "The computer printout on the two supply companies you found listed in those books also revealed some interesting stuff--both companies are sole proprietorships owned and operated by one Philip Dejohn."

"Phony companies he set up so he could have invoices and the like for that medical equipment he claimed he purchased for the home, right?" McCormick guessed.

"You got it." Laying a hand on his shoulder, Harper smiled. "That's it, Mark. All I have to do now is wake up a judge and get a search warrant, and you get those damned books back in the nursing home. I don't know why you stole 'em in the first place."

McCormick shook his head. "The judge was right. Leaving 'em laying out on the desk would've been even worse."

"I suppose," Harper agreed reluctantly, "but if you two come in here and confess any more crimes to me, I'm gonna lock you up for your own good." He slapped McCormick on the back. "Now, go get cleaned up and get back to that nursing home. Leave the books where I told you to, and sneak Milt outta there. As soon as I hear from you, we'll move in."

McCormick nodded grimly and started for the door.

"Mark, it was only a dream," Harper called after him softly.

"Yeah," he mumbled and closed the door quietly behind him.

* * * * *

Pulling up in front of the house, McCormick came to a stop, the lack of squealing tires revealing his frame of mind. A day's growth of beard darkened the youthful features, and his movements were slow, as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders.

Pausing, he gazed at the mansion looming before him and sighed. What was normally a welcome sight, today seemed so empty without the judge. Fragments of the nightmare came back to haunt him, and shivering as if a cold wind had suddenly blown in from the ocean, he unlocked the door and stepped into the hallway.

There was a rustling sound behind him, but before McCormick could turn he was grabbed roughly and slammed against the wall, his right arm twisted cruelly behind him. "What do you want?" he gasped and was jerked around, coming face to face with a dark-haired beauty. "Christine!"

"Yeah, and guess who's behind you," a deep voice snarled in his ear.

McCormick clenched his teeth as pain shot through his shoulder. "Alex, I don't know what the hell you think you're doin'," he hissed, "but you'd better let me go before you get more trouble'n you can handle!"

"I don't think you're in any position to give orders," Caldwell shot back. "You and Hardcastle shoulda kept your noses outta this one, buddy boy. It would've been a lot healthier for both of you."

"I...don't know what you're talking about," McCormick

hedged. His arm was jerked upward, the resulting pain causing his legs to go weak. Through a haze of white hot agony he saw Christine step in front of him.

A slenger finger stroked his chest above the zippered jacket. "Alex got a call this morning," the brunette pretended to pout. "Dejohn had the nerve to accuse us of stealing some silly ol' books and trying to blackmail him. Well, of course, Alex knew we were innocent, so he told Dejohn about you and the judge."

McCormick's eyes widened in horror.

"And guess what?" she continued in a silky voice. "It seems there's a 'patient' at the nursing home by the name of Milton C. Hardcastle. Now, can you imagine that."

"You bitch!" McCormick hissed.

Christine's fingernails raked down his chest, savagely scraping away layers of skin.

McCormick gasped, biting his lip to keep from crying out. The real agony, however, lay in the thought of Hardcastle alone at the nursing home, no doubt by now in the hands of Dejohn. The cigarette burn on the judge's neck flashed in his mind and McCormick struggled to free himself, ignoring the blinding pain in his shoulder.

"Where's the books?" Caldwell yelled.

Gritting his teeth, Mark leaned against the man behind him, and lifting his feet off the floor, brought his heels down hard across Caldwell's insteps.

Alex's scream almost deafened him, and McCormick jerked away, whirling around to bury a fist in his captor's stomach.

The bigger man doubled over, but swung upwards with his arm, backhanding McCormick with a force that knocked him across the hallway.

Staggering to his feet, McCormick grabbed up a lamp, desperation and a seventy pound weight difference making him forego any rules of etiquette. His aim was good, but with the quickness of a boxer, Caldwell ducked the lamp and charged him.

Grabbing the bannister, McCormick used it to propel himself up the stairs, hoping to make it to the judge's room and the bedstand where he kept his gun.

"Quit playing around!" Christine yelled at her brother. "We haven't got time for this! Let's just get him to Dejohn and let him find out where the books are."

McCormick had almost reached the top of the stairs when Caldwell caught up with him. Two bull arms came around him, crossing his lower chest and stomach and lifting him off the steps. His legs flailing wildly, McCormick's heels came in violent contact with Caldwell's shins several times before the larger man released him with a roar. Off balance, McCormick fell to his hands and knees. Crawling the rest of the way upstairs, he pulled himself up and made a dash for Hardcastle's room, Caldwell limping quickly behind.

He made it to the door, but Christine's cries of anger spurred Caldwell on, and he brought McCormick down with a flying tackle, two hundred and forty-five pounds slamming him into the floor. His breath driven out of him with a soft whoosh, he lay helpless, hovering in that limbo between awareness and black oblivion.

Rolling off him, Caldwell rose, and reaching down, grabbed McCormick and jerked him upright, an arm across his chest the only thing keeping him on his feet.

Christine appeared in the doorway, hands on her hips. "It's about time," she complained. "You must be getting soft if you can't even handle someone like him."

"Shut up, damn it!" Alex yelled back, and digging his hand in the pocket of McCormick's jeans, withdrew the keys to the Coyote. "I'll use the sports car and leave it there. You follow me," he directed.

This is it, McCormick thought. Once Caldwell turned him over to Dejohn, he and the judge were as good as dead. After not hearing from him, Harper would move in and search the place, but Dejohn, Mason, and all evidence of their crimes would be gone.

With that nightmare thought in mind, he struggled against his captor, knowing as he did so that the effort was futile. "You overgrown coward!" he hissed. "You haven't got the guts to kill anyone yourself, so you let Dejohn do your dirty work!"

Infuriated by his words, Caldwell slammed him against the wall, thick fingers closing around his neck. "I'll show you who's got guts!" he yelled.

McCormick tried to pull the hands away, but they were like a vise tightening around his throat, the thumbs pressing deeper into his Adam's Apple, cutting off his oxygen. Caldwell's face, contorted with rage, loomed in his fading vision.

"How's it feel to die?" Alex snarled.

Christine ran up behind her brother, grabbing his arm. "Stop it, you idiot! You kill McCormick and Dejohn will never let

us have that letter back!"

Her warning acting as a bucket of cold water on Caldwell's anger, his fingers loosened around McCormick's neck, then fell away altogether.

Suddenly without support of any kind, McCormick dropped to his knees, then slumped against the bed. "I'm sorry, Judge," he whispered and was lost in the blackness that engulfed him.